



Christianity, development, and global aid



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Editorial

Christian theology and faith convictions have been instrumental in fashioning the contemporary Western paradigm of international aid and development. Biblical themes integral to Christian anthropological understandings have shaped modern Western concepts linked to the agenda and progress of aid and development. The Christian conviction that humans are made in the image of God propelled the widely accepted idea, in Western societies, of inherent human dignity. A Christian eschatological vision of future harmony likewise framed a Western imagination of the progress and perfectibility of humanity. At the core of aid and development efforts across the globe, we see both the ideas of human dignity and the continual development of humanity.

Although it is a contested term, the very notion of a modern paradigm of “development” espouses the idea of a process for, and goal of, the enrichment and betterment of humans. One only needs look at the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals to see these core perceptions alive and well.¹ And yet the theology that gave rise to these views has all but disappeared from the discourse. In its place is the secular adoption of “the pragmatic sensibilities of religious conviction” expunged of its underlying theological rationale.² A question that often remains hidden in the pragmatism of the contemporary aid and development industry is what *now* is the philosophical foundation for affirming the pillars of secular humanism?

In the wake of professionalised and state-funded humanism, secular agendas have increasingly defined the aid and development space. These secular agendas often give the appearance of being “neutral”, while “religious ideas, convictions, and institutions” are “considered more a threat than a promise.”³ This is a strange dilemma, indeed, considering that Western secular humanism, most notably demonstrated in aid and development, might be interpreted as “a secular religion thrown together from the decaying scraps of Christian myth.”⁴ These tensions raise pressing questions about the current interaction of Christian faith in aid

and development, particularly in the face of the significant presence of faith-based organisations in the “industry”. Is Christianity a mere ideological threat, or might it continue to be a legitimate source to resource, refine, and challenge contemporary rationales and praxis? This themed edition of *St Mark's Review* reflects on these issues. The papers consider Christian contributions to the contested space of poverty alleviation and human well-being. While acknowledging the complex interaction between faith and aid and development initiatives, a common theme emerges in this edition: that Christian theology, community, and praxis offer vital resources to supplement and challenge existing paradigms.

Justin Thacker's article insightfully challenges conceptions from the Global North that tend towards a sociality favouring individualised identity and well-being. The Global North, he argues, erroneously bases social well-being and development on a “scarcity” model that emphasises competition for limited resources rather than generous communion. Thacker draws on African Christianity's “Ubuntu Theology” to contest underlying rationales that thwart human flourishing. His paper contests the hubris of Western individualism with a theological anthropology based on communal relationality and abundance. For Thacker, a Christian theology of *generous mutuality* in community is the basis for human identity, prosperity, and well-being. Thacker proposes that it should be a regulatory factor in the delivery of development and aid.

Alana Moore takes us to the coalface of Christian engagement in child sponsorship efforts, reflecting on their efficacy and praxis from an International Relations perspective. Moore canvasses weaknesses of the “Child Sponsorship” model but usefully identifies various strengths beyond mere neo-liberal criteria. The article emphasises the Christian value of localised and personalised relationality for effective outcomes in well-being generated through child sponsorship. Moore also ponders the dual significance of Christian theology to not only shape positive narratives but to disrupt narratives of harmful “saviour mentalities” and negative paternalism.

Bob Kikuyu offers a valuable post-colonial perspective on the nexus of Christian faith and development in Africa. Kikuyu's paper resonates with

Moore's article, identifying the significance of the "localisation" of Church communities to affect developmental outcomes. He notes the effectiveness of responding to crises due to the strong bonds that traditional and communal Christian values create. The importance of supportive faith communities to address humanitarian and developmental issues makes for an interesting juxtaposition with the individualism of the Global North noted in Thacker's article. Again, Kikuyu focuses on the theological significance of human communion for flourishing, drawing inspiration from the divine solidarity with creatures demonstrated in Jesus Christ.

Finally, Thia Cooper's review and analysis of a large sample of recent scholarship from the Global South categorises recent research on the interaction of Christianity and development. Cooper's analysis collates evidence regarding ways in which Christianity is construed as a promise, a threat, *or* a challenge to contemporary development practice. Her consideration of the dialectic presence of both promise and threat, help and harm, should prompt critical reflection and cautious optimism about the continuing role of Christianity in aid and development.

It is our hope that the following articles might offer new resources for identifying the promise and challenge of Christian belief and practice in aid and development, while not eliding the reality—present in every human endeavour—of possible threat. I commend these articles to the readers of *St Mark's Review*.

Dr Jacqueline Service
Guest Editor

Endnotes

1. The goals are outline here: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, "The 17 Goals," <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.
2. Jacqueline Service, "Contesting the Dynamics of Secular Development: An Ontology of Trinitarian Well-Being as Christian Rationale for Human Well-Being," *Religion and Development* 1, no. 1 (2022): 46.
3. J. Bryan Hehir, "Why Religion? Why Now?," in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred C. Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 18.
4. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta Books, 2002), 31.